

anywhere I feel safe, I'll dig my hands in to bury them
by 10pintsofsacrifice

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Genre: Child Abuse, Childhood Trauma, F/F, F/M, M/M, Other, Past Child Abuse, Past Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Trans Female Character, Trans Mike Wheeler, also this is largely headcanon based, just so y'all know I'm not writing anything positive abt billy or neil hargrove, so uh. yeah!

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Claudia Henderson, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Steve Harrington & The Stranger Things Kids

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Summary:

steve and the party.

(title from "a tree grows in the body" by emily palermo.)

anywhere I feel safe, I'll dig my hands in to bury them

Author's Note:

steve harrington, babysitter of the year? it's more likely than you think
anyway I wanted to write smth kinda self-indulgent bc I love the idea of him being protective over the kids,, yes
warnings for graphic depictions of physical abuse/child abuse!! please tread carefully!!
wrt the "trans mike wheeler" tag, I am of the belief that she is a trans girl!

i. the zoomer.

the phone rings at just past midnight. steve is the only one awake when he answers with a soft and gravelly, "harrington residence. this is steve."

"oh, thank god," he hears on the other end, the sound of a soft and shaking voice bringing him out of his sleepy haze. he sobers up fully when he hears the clearing of a throat, the way the breath hitches like an attempt to evade tears. "uh, hi, steve," max nearly whispers. it's quiet in a way that's so unlike her, like she doesn't want to be heard. "look, I know it's late and I'm - uh, I'm sorry, but can you come pick me up? please?"

as if he'd ever say no. he's twirling his car keys around his fingers before she even finishes asking, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, fingertips prickling with electric anxiety.

"I shouldn't have called so late. I'm sorry, I'll - "

"no, max, hey," he says gently. he makes his voice soft when he speaks to her because she doubts she's heard any kind words in the last few hours. he hears her snuffle lightly and his eyes prick with the threat of tears from the sound alone. "just, wait at the end of your street and I'll be there as soon as I can."

"kay," she whimpers, and suddenly he is very afraid of what he'll find when he's face-to-face with her. "sorry."

he swallows roughly and shakes his head before he realizes that she can't see him. he clears his throat and tries to regulate the emotion in his voice. "don't be, max, it's okay." he runs his tongue over his bottom lip thoughtfully. he runs a slightly-shaking hand through his not-quite-sleep-mussed hair and lets his eyes slip closed for a moment.

"I'll be there soon," he repeats. she chokes on a sob, as if she's trying to keep it secret.

"o-okay, okay, thanks."

he hums in acknowledgement and wonders if there's anything else he should say when the phone beeps. she's already hung up. *probably didn't wanna be in that house any longer than she had to*, he thinks to himself. it's enough to make the blood in his veins run cold.

there's a slight, uncomfortable twinge in his chest, the same feeling settling in heart as the one that did that night at the byers', the same feeling that pushed him to throw that punch at billy hargrove. *I swear if he laid a hand on her, he's dead.*

his car rumbles to life, breaking the sleepy silence on his street, only serving to further wake him. he tries to remember not to speed.

he'd had her address memorized only a week after that night, and it became a thing between them, a thing that if she needed him all she had to do was call. she'd scoffed and crossed her arms but her eyes were very telling. "not that I need your help or anything, harrington." she smiled when she thought he wasn't looking.

he's there in record time, finding her in a long t-shirt and what must be shorts underneath. as soon as she opens the passenger door and slides in, he can see just from looking at her that she's shaking harder than he's ever seen her, and she's keeping her hair in a concealing curtain in front of her face. it's making his guts twist into intricate knots, the longer the silence goes on.

"hey. mad max," he tries, gentle as he can, "tell me what's going on. I can't help if I don't know what's wrong, you know."

"I know," she mumbles and her voice is so small and so weak, and she lets out a long shuddery breath before pressing the heels of her palms into her eyes. her shoulders hunch up until they're around her ears.

he mumbles that he's moving his hand and goes to brush her fiery hair from her face - she hums, as best she can. if he thought that he was afraid before it was nothing compared to the way he felt now. deep blue and black bruising bloomed around her eye socket and spread beneath her eye - curling up along the side of her nose, ugly and bright, red in some places and purple in others. steve feels a fire light in his belly.

"did billy do this?" he whispers. he thinks that if he speaks any louder he'll explode. he knows what she's going to say before she says it. "did he hurt you?"

"he, uh," she breathes, "got mad. I was in the way."

"fuck."

she nods weakly, her head lolling back against the seat. "p-pretty much."

"I'm gonna fucking kill him," steve mumbles and he looks down in surprise when a shaking hand settles on top of his own.

"don't," she whispers and steve didn't know there could be so much pleading in just one word. "he kicked your ass last time and if I hadn't stopped him when I did he would have - he would *kill* you steve and it would be my fault - "

"breathe," steve says calmly, pulling his hand out from beneath hers to lace their fingers together. he rubs circles into her knuckles. she makes a funny little *ghh* noise, like she's trying to hold something back, like there's something so big and heavy inside of her that it would break her to let it out. she folds her lip between her teeth and stills. "first of all, he played dirty when he broke that plate over my head. second of all it's never your fault."

and that's all it takes for the dam to break, max letting out great heaving sobs that seem to come from deep within her. steve doesn't think he has ever heard someone sound so hurt. it makes him actually *want* to kill billy if it meant max would be safe.

he pulls her against him as best he can from the driver's seat. he cards his fingers through her hair and whispers reassurances - things his mother had once done for him, and he finds it strangely easy to settle into the role of the caregiver.

"he got drunk, and he pushed me a little too hard against the mantle. I just kind of - the picture, the picture frame fell, the one of mom and neil at their wedding." the tears fall faster than she can wipe them away. she lets them slide down her cheeks and collect at her chin. "it shattered and he got - he got so *angry* at me."

"hey, hey," he murmurs, moving his free hand up and down her back as her breath hitches again. he feels his mouth go dry the more she gasps and trembles. he sees her brows furrow and he watches her thin fingers curl into white-knuckled fists.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "this is so dumb of me."

"like hell it is."

her head snaps up and his heart aches at the surprise he finds in her gaze. he wonders how long it's been since someone let this girl be a *kid*. "it happens all the time. I shouldn't be scared anymore."

"that's bullshit," he says and he winces when nancy's voice rings back. "you shouldn't have to be used to it."

she is silent then, and she lets out a shivering breath, pressing her face into his chest, gentle as she can due to her injured eye. with a sinking in his stomach he gets the feeling that she's never actually been allowed to be upset. he wonders how many nights she's spent holed up in her bedroom, praying that she'll be left alone just this once or waiting for the screaming to start.

and so he holds her because that's the best he can do and that's what

she needs right now.

even at her weakest, max is still one of the strongest girls he's ever met.

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ii. the paladin.

despite dating her sister steve wasn't all that familiar with the middle wheeler. it wasn't that he didn't like her, because he thought she was funny sometimes, with her sharp tongue and intelligent sarcasm, it's just that they never saw a reason to spend any time together outside of when he'd visit nancy. she was usually off doing her own thing somewhere else, and judging from some of the stories nancy had told him he figured that was just fine.

then he ended up playing babysitter.

even after he'd been relieved of his duties he'd ended up hanging around the kids. it was probably a little weird, but in all honesty the party was a lot cooler than most of the kids at the high school. maybe it's sad but that's how it is. he finds himself enjoying their company, and they enjoy his, sometimes even inviting him to d&d night despite him having no knowledge whatsoever on how the game is played. they invite him just to have him there, even if he has no idea what the fuck he's doing. that, and sometimes his commentary was rather funny.

"you know, steve," mike says absently while picking at the baby blue polish on her nails, "nancy didn't think you were a shitty boyfriend."

"oh, really," he says and he tries to make it sound like he doesn't care but he can't help feeling a little hopeful. *old habits die hard.*

"mm," she hums, holding her hand out in front of her, splaying her fingers out as if it'll help her see better. it's something steve never really understood, and something he feels he never really will. once she's satisfied with whatever it was that she was doing, she folds her arms over the table and sighs.

"little wheeler? hello?"

her eyes are half-lidded and glazed over, as though she's seeing and not seeing at the same time. she taps her fingers against her forearm slowly. it's not the first time he's caught her like this, but it never ceases to worry him each time.

he debates waving his hand over her eyes but she'd probably get pissed. that's just a mike thing, mike with her quick temper and steely eyes and she takes a breath -

she squares her shoulders and finally focuses on him, eyes soft and somewhat sad.

"I'm sorry for what happened."

okay. out of all the things steve expected her to say, that definitely wouldn't have been at the top of his list. mike can be mean but she wouldn't be *that* mean. he feels the restless bouncing of her leg beneath the table, hears the way that on her exhales it pushes little huffs out of her. "she never blamed you for barb." mike's always been a fidgeter, and she rolls the cuff of her sweater between her thumb and forefinger when she says it. she looks like maybe she's a little uncomfortable, like she wants to help but doesn't really know how. she clears her throat.

"I dunno, I just, I wanted you to know I guess," she says, suddenly very focused on her hands as she rubs the fabric of her sweater. "after all you did for us, I guess I just figured...I mean, you deserve to know."

suddenly, steve feels very out of place, kind of confused, but mostly touched that mike would even think of his feelings, not that she is a cold person otherwise. he knows how affectionate she is, depending on the person. she never showed much interest in him before but she would smile at him awkwardly across the dinner table sometimes when mrs. and mr. wheeler fought.

she runs a hand through her curls and looks up. her eyes are soft and questioning. it's not until she's looking at him that he realizes he's been silent the entire time.

"thanks," he murmurs, blinking and then running a hand over his

face. "I mean, thank you, mike. really."

she gives him the smallest and faintest of nods, the corners of her lips twitching. she exhales through her nose and looks toward the middle of the basement, a fond look softening the sharpness of her face, rolling her eyes as lucas and dustin wrestled while will worried and max and jane cheered.

sometimes he forgets that mike has been through so much. she thought her girlfriend(?) was dead for three hundred and fifty-three days but she still called every night, still let that little thorn of hope cling to her heart. she watched that monster disintegrate and take jane with it, she's seen her possessed best friend send soldiers to their deaths, she has seen a man be ripped open and torn apart by mini-versions of said monster.

(she has jumped off cliffs she has fought armed men -)

"I was sorta like that with max," she mumbles lowly, tracing swirls against the smooth surface of the table. "I felt so bad and bitter and I took it out on her, but she didn't deserve it."

steve doesn't know what else to do but nod, letting her know that he's listening. she swallows roughly and turns her head towards her friends again, and somehow he knows exactly who she's looking at.

"I guess I was just jealous that my friends got to have crushes and have them around," she sighs as she twirls her hair around her finger. "I didn't want her in the party because I thought she'd be taking el's place."

teenage jealousy, steve thinks to himself, brutal on its own but trauma can't help.

steve knows that kind of jealousy like the back of his hand, well-versed from spending years around carol and her friends, years of listening to them call girls they didn't like *sluts* and *bitches*. the difference here is that steve knows that mike would never call max any of those words. she might be sour-tempered sometimes, but she knows when to draw the line. like steve said, she's a smart kid. he knows that much.

"I get what you mean," he says softly as he lets out a sigh, relaxing back in his chair. mike opens and closes her mouth like there's something else she wants to say, but the words won't come.

she tangles her fingers in a handful of curls, worrying her lip. she looks like she's debating on something.

he turns his head toward the other kids to give her some time, smiling at the scene presented to him. jane has her nose buried in a book, her head resting in max's lap as she cards her fingers gently through jane's curls. lucas and dustin sit across from each other, playing some kind of card game. "now *you* go fish, lucas," dustin says smugly.

"steve, nancy, sh-she does love you," mike finally manages.

"she's with big byers now," steve says, the fond smile on his face turning somewhat bittersweet.

mike nods, avoiding his eyes for a few moments. her bitten lips are pressed into a firm line. "I, um...I'm sorry," she murmurs barely above a whisper, "I messed it up."

"hey," steve says gently. he puts a reassuring hand on mike's shoulder, giving her a crooked smile. "nah, you...you had good intentions."

"s true, though," she mumbles into her hands, stomach sucking in and shoulders hunching. like she's trying to make herself smaller than she really is. she swallows roughly and scrubs a hand over her face.

when she looks back up steve notices the shadows beneath her eyes. they're dark and bruise-like, darker than he remembers them ever being, and he knows a thing or two about losing sleep, so he just pats her shoulder. he knows what she says is true.

some of the awkwardness between them is broken after that.

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iii. the cleric.

steve didn't know much about little byers. he is unendingly polite and

respectful toward the people around him, so open in his love and so soft-spoken in his words. he is a very gentle sort of boy, the kind you'd expect to bring a book to recess, or the kind that finishes his homework in class with time to spare.

all of the suffering he's been put through has only made him kind, a stark and obvious contrast to *some* people that he could name, and he has never been intentionally hurtful or unkind. steve doesn't count the time that will spent possessed for, well, obvious reasons.

you can't tell by looking at him but he's had a pretty rough life. the byers are pretty unlucky. (at least will, joyce and jo are.) from an emotionally and physically abusive father to another dimension and two monsters, will byers can't seem to catch a break.

"he's been through a lot," steve remembers dustin telling him.

"well, yeah," steve had replied. "not everyone dies and comes back to life."

naturally this only makes steve want to protect him more, because of course it does. will is such a sweet kid. he deserves to be happy. even when the world hadn't been kind to him he still smiled and held his head up. even when he struggled he was apologetic and soft. he *thanked* nancy for stabbing him with the hot poker. he apologized to his mom for bob. the kid carries a lot of guilt, mostly for things out of his control, that's for sure.

and his art. his art, some of the most beautiful and colourful works steve has ever seen, all from a thirteen year old. even his sketches are incredibly detailed.

"I've been drawing since I was four. I've had nine years of practice," he tells steve one day when he notices that he'd been watching him draw, cheeks going pink and shoulders hunching just a bit.

"It's amazing," steve murmurs, exhaling softly. his eyes follow soft curls and quietly messy lines, trace the creases of suspiciously familiar eyes. "it's just so realistic, kinda like a photo." steve can't help but smile when the corners of will's lips twitch and his cheeks darken further at the praise. his hand trembles slightly, but dustin said that

his hands had always done that, especially after the fall of '83.

steve thinks that he knows who the person in the sketch is, a head full of unruly curls that twist in all directions and a very specific smile. there's also the scrunched up nose, the way their smile reaches up high on their cheeks.

there's also the gap in the teeth, and steve only knows of one kid that has one, only knows one with long and tightly-curled hair to go with it. steve watches as will fills the cheeks and beneath the chin in with soft shading, a smile slowly working its way onto his face. will always looks so at peace when he's got a pencil and paper, losing himself in the act of creating art. sometimes drawing something out is easier than speaking for him. the colours he uses always work together, never appearing especially garrish or jarring, and sometimes used in combinations that steve never would've thought of otherwise.

"It's like, also kind of cartoony," steve mumbles as will takes a deep breath, as if he'd forgotten to breathe for a moment. will doesn't lift his head but steve sees the corners of his lips lift ever so slightly.

"that's the idea. 'm trying to make my own style."

steve lets out a low whistle. "it sure is working well, billiam."

"billiam? that's one I've never heard before," will says with a soft snort that makes his eyes widen and his cheeks darken with embarrassment.

"I have to be original somehow. everyone calls you will."

"fair," will murmurs, bending his head down so close to his fist that his cheek nearly touches the paper. "jo calls me li'l bill and sometimes max calls me wilhelm or willard."

"of course she does. that's how she is," steve says with a snort, purposefully avoiding any mention of jo for obvious reasons.

"yeah. the one name everyone avoids is billy," will mumbles as he sets his pencil down and rolls his wrist and cracks his knuckles. he thrusts his arms out until his elbows pop and then stretches them out

behind his head. "will's everyone's favourite."

"I can imagine why," steve mutters, wrinkling his nose unconsciously. "billy's a dick."

"I haven't met him yet. I don't like him very much."

"hopefully you won't ever meet him," steve grumbles, taking a moment to twist in his chair until his back pops. the back of his neck hurts and he never noticed until he sat up. the aches spread down into his shoulders and down his spine. "the girls might fawn over him, but I doubt they still would if they knew what he was *really* like."

"mm, I should hope not," will says softly and looks back down at his sketchbook. a small fond smile and steve swears his cheeks are glowing. steve blinks when will clears his throat and looks to him for the first time in the past thirty minutes.

"can I tell you something," he says, his breath hitching just a bit as worry creases his brows. if steve didn't know any better he'd say that will almost looks afraid. "and will you promise - will you promise not to tell anyone if I do?"

for a second steve's stomach jolts, because he has no idea what will is going to say. after being taken to an alternate dimension and being possessed, nothing he could say would really be surprising but. steve is still somewhat afraid of that will come out.

"sure, little byers."

he pauses for a moment, mouth pressed into a firm line, taking a deep breath and letting out a shaky exhale. he looks like he's thinking hard about what it is that he wants to say. "I, uh, I think that I might, um. I think I like boys, and I think I like a specific boy."

the words come out on a rush of breath, and steve notices the increase in the trembling of his shoulders. he swallows roughly and folds his lip between his teeth, eyes shining with unshed tears and swimming with fear, wrapping his arms tight around his middle. steve realizes, with a dull sort of horror, that he never said anything

after will's honest confession.

"hey, it's okay little man," steve says gently and offers what he hopes is a reassuring smile. "I like boys too. I like boys and girls but there's nothing wrong with just liking boys."

"but *I'm* a boy," will whimpers and presses the heels of his palms into his eyes, breath hitching. steve slowly reaches out and places a gentle hand on will's shaking shoulder.

"I'm a boy too," steve says, squeezing the kid's shoulder lightly. he notes how bony it feels and reminds himself to maybe bring that up to mrs. byers. "and you don't think there's anything wrong with me, right?"

"no," will practically whispers and a tear finally slides down his cheek. a lump rises in steve's throat at the sight and he feels a painful twinge in his chest.

"well," steve hums, "then there's nothing wrong with you, kid."

the watery smile will gives him conveys all the relief he can't.

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iv. the ranger.

steve didn't really know what to think of lucas the night they met, holed up in the old bus in the junkyard as it became surrounded by demodogs. he saw the way that his and max's hands gravitated toward each other, heard in his voice the fear masked by bravado.

but lucas is not a coward.

he is brave but also intelligent. out of the six of them, lucas is the closest thing to fearless, and definitely the most level-headed. he tries not to let himself be swayed by emotion, instead relying on logic and reason.

max trusts him. dustin trusts him, mike and will and jane trust him, and that's the entire party. it's safe to say that lucas is trustworthy.

he is honest but not brutally so. sometimes he can be a bit blunt, but most kids his age are, and his quick quips are not only really funny but smart. he is well aware that he is a smart kid. steve is glad for it. he deserves to know.

but when it comes to max, something inside of him melts. she makes him happy, and he wants to make sure she's happy too. he wants to keep her safe and sound. he wants her to know she's welcome in their party.

steve knows the look he gets in his eyes. it's the same look that mike gets around jane or will gets around dustin when he thinks he's not looking, and it's the way steve looked at nancy once upon a time. pure, honest love.

he's definitely smitten with her. that's for sure.

he's protective of her but he also knows that she can take care of herself, knows when to give her space and let her do her own thing. he is honest in his feelings and is careful in his words. when something bothers him he lets her know and she does the same.

what steve doesn't expect is lucas to come to him for dating advice.

"so steve," lucas starts while the other party members attempt disastrously to play twister. "I heard you know some stuff about dating." he rubs the back of his neck and steve notices the embarrassment in his slightly hunched shoulders. he's got a small and sheepish smile on his face.

he turns his head and steve follows the line of his gaze. he traces it to max and the corners of his lips twitch ever so slightly. he finds it more cute than he would ever admit to out loud, and it's obvious who lucas had in mind when he asked for advice.

"I need some help," lucas says quietly once he turns back around to face steve.

"I can try my best," steve murmurs gently, arching his eyebrow and smiling playfully. "obviously I don't really know much." lucas winces a bit and softly utters an apology. steve waves him off with a crooked

grin.

"what do girls like?"

such a loaded question with an infinite amount of answers, but steve remembers asking himself the same thing at one time or another. steve hums thoughtfully.

"depends on the girl really," he starts. he decides he'd better give lucas better advice than what he tried to give dustin now that the sting of the break up is gone. "every single girl is different."

"well yeah," lucas says with a snort. he runs a quick hand through his hair and then scratches at his cheek nervously. steve can tell that he's anxious.

"so it's kinda simple, then," steve says with a grin. he taps his fingers against his thigh and closes his eyes for a few seconds. he feels himself breathe for a few moments and then he lets out a gentle sigh. "there's no one answer to that."

"how will I know then?" lucas asks, bouncing his leg restlessly but listening closely. he shoves his hands into his pockets.

"easy," steve tells him, "you ask her."

lucas' eyes widen subtly and he nods, rubbing a hand over his face. "that makes sense," he mutters, rubbing his nose quick and sighing, shoulders slumping with relief. "I don't really know why I didn't just think of that."

steve finds himself cracking another smile.

"nah, man," he says, letting out a faint yawn. he waves again, as if telling lucas *don't worry about it*. "I get it, you just wanna make her happy."

"all the time," lucas replies quickly, his eyes half-lidded and a little glazed. it's a look steve sees a lot these days.

"I think you already do."

lucas is quiet for a few long moments. steve wonders if he even heard him at all, because he doesn't turn back to respond, doesn't even hum in acknowledgement. he lets out a soft little sigh, a grin splitting his face. "you really think so, steve? I'm trying my best."

"of course I do," steve replies with a slight shake of his head, more fond than anything. damn, these kids sure have his number. steve watches as max finally catches sight of lucas staring and gives him her own smile while affectionately calling him "stalker." that's their thing, steve supposes.

he calls her maxie and steve chuckles a little when her eyebrows furrow. she tells him not to call her that, but the corners of her lips shake with a repressed smile.

"she trusts you," steve continues quietly, watching max's cheeks slowly turn pink. now it's her turn to stare. lucas rubs a hand over his face and holds it over his eyes for a few moments, grinning wide. steve can't help but think that his face has got to hurt. his own face hurts.

"I think she trusts you more than anyone."

"she trusts all of us," lucas says when he finally turns back to face steve. he shrugs but steve can see the hope in his eyes.

"well of course she does - I mean, she didn't ditch you when shit went south, even when she knew how dangerous sticking around was."

"yeah, I know," lucas says and he schools his expression. "she's so brave."

steve folds his lip between his teeth, a tender sort of warmth sitting in his chest. how he ended up babysitting and practically adopting six middle schoolers he didn't know, but hell if he didn't deeply care about them.

they've been through a lot. steve never really thought of that before the whole demodogs thing. he knows that he, nancy and jo went through shit but the kids were there too, they saw the demogorgon. "she is pretty brave," steve concedes with a nod, tilting his head back

and yawning again. "but honestly...all of you are brave, badass middle schoolers, y'know?"

lucas snorts, shaking his head faintly. "you going soft on us, harrington?"

"nothin' wrong with stating facts," steve hums, shrugging his shoulders. his fingers drums a loose pattern against his thigh. "you little shits are way smarter than me, honestly. I do have you beat by a nail bat though."

lucas nods in an *can't argue with that I guess* kind of way. his eyes flutter shut for a moment, and then blink back open, eyes shining with curiosity. "how did dustin even know about the bat, anyway?"

"hell if I know," steve mumbles. "dustin works in mysterious ways."

now *that* got a good laugh out of lucas, loud enough to make the rest of the party glance at him quizzically. "don't I know it."

"I *still* don't know how he convinced me to help him catch a petal-head," steve sighs and the two of them chuckle.

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v. the mage.

because mrs. byers and chief hopper wanted to go out for the night, and because nancy and jo were off doing something, steve found himself watching over six children again at the hoppers' cabin. originally hopper had said no to a sleepover, but steve guesses their puppy eyes and relentless pleading softened something inside of him. and, well, the fact that when jane hopper gets mad things tend to float.

steve had heard many things about jane, mostly that she's literally a real life superhero. after the demogorgon, nancy telling him about a girl that could move things with her mind was definitely not out of the realm of possibility.

he didn't get to meet the girl behind the legend until the fall of '84, and her big entrance was just as grand as he'd expect for someone

like her. not only does she toss a demodog through one of the byers' windows and then unlock their chain link from the outside, she closes the rift and therefore closes off the main portal to the upside down.

funnily enough, his first thought upon seeing her was, *now there's another kid to take care of*. jane had made it clear that she didn't need anyone else to protect her but he still felt like he needed to. she carried herself like she'd seen the world fall to its knees and with an elegant kind of grace for only being thirteen years old.

the slicked-back hair and raccoon eyes was definitely a good look, in steve's opinion. it made her look even more badass than she already was and it was just plain cool. if he were to be honest, it's the kind of look he wishes he could pull off, but he knows there's no way in hell that would happen.

it's a weird feeling, to be around a small girl that could snap his neck with a tilt of her head. he wouldn't exactly call it intimidation, and he does not feel unsafe in her presence, because he knows she would never hurt him without reason. he guesses the feeling is best described as admiration, a little bit of envy, and a whole lot of protectiveness.

right now it's late, about half an hour past one in the morning, but steve is still awake. he's the only one left awake. he always is.

ever since the fall of '83, he's had trouble getting to and staying asleep. when he does manage to fall asleep the nightmares wake him up. he wouldn't admit it but he hates the idea of being that vulnerable and open to attack should anything happen.

about half a year after they defeated the demogorgon he'd finally begun to feel normal again, and then the whole demodog fiasco only heightened and intensified that fear. he had just stopped having to sleep with his lamp on, and now he was back at square one.

luckily, the kids feel safer keeping a lamp on too so he doesn't have to worry about keeping them awake. the only sounds breaking the tranquil silence are dustin's soft snores and mike's quiet snuffly breaths, and the occasional grunt and rustle as someone shifts.

max lets out a particularly loud exhale, and lucas wrinkles his nose, mumbling something too quiet for steve to hear, and he tightens his arm around her middle. will, sleeping back-to-back with max, sighs as his fingers firmly intertwined with dustin's relax ever so slightly.

mike and jane lay only a few feet away, jane tucked beneath mike's chin with her arms against mike's chest and their legs intertwined. they'd fallen into that position as if it were second nature, steve had noticed. even after spending nearly a year apart they still remembered how to fit against one another.

he's just drifting off to sleep when a loud and startled gasp breaks the silence, causing him to jump and glance around frantically, mumbling a very soft, "what the shit?"

jane is sitting up with heaving shoulders.

steve pauses for a moment, listening to her rapid breathing as it slowly evens out. he wants to go and ask her what's wrong, but he feels like he's on unfamiliar grounds.

"hey," he says very gently. her eyes snap to his and he notes that they're wide and bright. her eyebrows are furrowed, and her hands reach up to card through her shoulder-length curls. "hey."

she looks down at mike and then back up at steve, her face illuminated softly by the gentle light of the lamp. she looks like she doesn't know what to do, moving like she's going to get up but pausing just before she does.

"it's okay," he tells her quietly. he folds his lip between his teeth, worried that maybe he made her uncomfortable. she doesn't know him well, never really went out of her way to say much of anything to him.

"what's going on?"

"nightmare," she says, very slowly and very deliberately. she brings her hands up to her cheeks and steve realizes she must be crying, her breath hitching periodically and her shoulders jumping with quiet sobs.

"do you wanna sit with me?" he asks carefully, patting the cushion next to him. she opens and closes her mouth.

"please," she murmurs shakily. he nods and scoots over to make some more room for her.

she has a blanket wrapped tightly around her shoulders and she keeps her head down. she sits beside him timidly and slowly, tucking herself into the other side of the couch so that their thighs didn't so much as touch. steve doesn't take insult to her being apprehensive of him, as they didn't speak much. he's pretty sure she just thinks of him as the babysitter.

"hey, jane."

"steve," she mumbles with a sharp nod, her eyelids fluttering for a moment. she squeezes her eyes closed and dislodges some tears from her lashes.

"so what..." he pauses, worrying that he's intruding on her privacy. "what was your nightmare about?"

"bad place," she whispers. steve remembers when mike explained the bad place to him. "they hurt...hurt my mama. hurt me."

"hurt you how?" steve asks, unsure if he can handle what she might say.

"the sharp silver things," she says. "the...blades." she rolls up her sweater sleeves, revealing several white and thick raised lines all over her forearms. his breath catches in his throat for a moment, and he holds it until his lungs begin to ache. he exhales, and she tugs the collar of the sweater down to reveal even more on her upper arms, hands shaking wildly.

"they cut you?" he breathes, restraining himself from reaching out to touch one. *not my place*, he tells himself.

"they said...it made me stronger. made...made my powers better," she whimpers, squeezing her eyes shut again. steve feels a dull sort of rage building in his stomach. how someone could do that to a child, how someone could be that monstrous, he doesn't know. it makes

him want to hurt whoever hurt jane.

"wanted...to make me angry," she mumbles. she folds her lip between her teeth, shoulders hunching up around her ears. she presses the heels of her palms into her eyes and lets out a gentle cry, trembling and restrained.

without thinking, steve opens his arms and offers his side to her, shushing her and whispering quiet reassurances. what he didn't expect was for her to lean in and press her face against his side.

"I don't want to be angry," she sobs, and steve feels her tears begin to soak into his shirt. "I don't want to be bad."

steve's heart twinges painfully in his chest. he can't even begin to imagine what those fuckers at the lab made her do. "you aren't bad," he tells her, alternating between rubbing soft circles into her upper arm and carding his fingers through her thick curls. *I'm such a mom.* "you are so far from bad. you came back, you closed the rift, you saved our asses. you aren't bad, kiddo. I promise."

"steve, I've killed."

"I know," he says carefully, bringing his arm around to just hold her, feeling her shoulders shake and her chest rise and fall.

"would put me in the dark room, too." she lets out a shaking breath. "if I didn't listen. I've killed."

"you feel guilty," he hums, and he feels her stiffen against him, but she nods very subtly. "that means you regret it." she turns her head up to him, her cheeks glittering with tears, her eyebrows drawn in confusion.

"regret?"

"it means you feel bad about it," steve tells her, patting his fingertips against her shoulder. "means you didn't want to. you know?"

"I - yes," she breathes, and he feels some of the tension in her shoulders and body leave.

"you know you're safe here, I promise," he says, remembering how much she likes that word, and he feels his heart break a little for this small but incredibly strong girl. "you don't have to hurt anyone anymore, and you're *not* bad."

"okay, steve," she mutters, and even though she doesn't smile or thank him he knows she appreciates it.

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vi. the bard.

steve spends more time at the hendersons' than he does his own house, following the fall of '84. mrs. henderson likes to invite him over for dinner and dustin likes having him there.

"so steve," mrs. henderson asks one night, a playful smile on her face. "you got any girls after you?" dustin winces, sending him a look that says *I'm sorry she just asked that*. he shrugs and mouths that she doesn't know about him and nancy, that it's okay. he tries his best to smile but it's a little awkward, the corners of his lips trembling with the effort.

"not really, mrs. h." it's the truth.

she looks genuinely surprised to hear his answer, and a real smile works its way onto his face, though small and bittersweet it was. "what a surprise," she murmurs, pressing her hand over her heart as dustin lets out a soft groan.

"maaaa," dustin whines. "why do you have to ask him that?" he presses his face into his hands for a moment; steve knows his cheeks are pink, knows he's probably more than a little embarrassed.

"I'm just curious, dusty," she replies. he lets out another groan at the mention of the nickname. it's not the first time steve's heard her call him that but it always amuses him when dustin sounds so exasperated.

dustin pinches the bridge of his nose, eyes screwed shut. "ma. ixnay on the ustyday."

his mom lets out a soft giggle, waving him off. "oh, dusty. don't be silly. I've called you that since forever."

dustin lets out a little grunt of acknowledgement, and steve knows that it is not unkind, because even if he'd never admit it out loud he did like that nickname. "well." he exhales. "I...fair enough."

"anyway, it's just a question. steve doesn't mind. do you, sweetheart?"

"not at all, mrs. henderson," steve says with a small smile. it isn't like he's lying when he says it doesn't bother him. mrs. henderson cares about what goes on in his life, more so than his own parents ever did. she's actually interested in how he's doing and how his week went. "dustin's just...you know. a goofball, really."

"don't I know it. he's always been that way."

"I'm right here, you know," dustin mutters with an indignant huff. steve chuckles quietly and reaches out to ruffle his thick curls. dustin pushes up against his hand like he always does, letting out his special purring noise playfully.

"well," steve says quietly as he leans back in his chair and stretches his arms out, letting out a soft groan, his stomach aching ever so slightly from how much he ate. admittedly, he only gets home-cooked meals when he's at the hendersons', and he didn't know how much he craved them until he finally got to have one. "dustin and I are gonna meet up with the other gremlins, if that's okay." he grins when mrs. henderson lets out a laugh.

she tells them to be safe and have fun, leaning in and pressing a kiss to dustin's cheek and smiling fondly when he wrinkles his nose and acts like he hates it. he shoves his hands into his pockets, but he turns and presses a quick kiss to her cheek too, before saying that he loved her and he'd see her tomorrow.

"don't forget your backpack," steve says pointedly. dustin's eyes light up with remembrance and he utters a soft *oh shit!* and he dashes down the hall to his bedroom. steve shakes his head, but he knows he has a fond smile on his face. what a dork.

"he really likes you, you know, and looks up to you," mrs. henderson says when she turns to him. "he talks about you all the time, steve."

"is that so," steve murmurs with a grin. he twirls his car keys around his finger. "well, I'm glad." he turns his head when he hears the slightly-too-loud closing of dustin's bedroom door. dustin nearly trips in his excitement, barely catching himself before he crashes to the carpet. "I'm okay," he reassures them. "it's cool."

steve calls him a dork and dustin sticks his tongue out. his mom tells them goodnight one more time before they head out the door and into steve's car, standing in the doorway until both doors shut. the engine rumbles to life and steve glances at his watch. *it's already 9:30.*

"uh, steve," dustin says when they're roughly halfway to the wheelers', eyes trained on the window and cheeks a little pink. he sounds somewhat nervous, steve notes, and he hums in acknowledgement to let him know he's listening. dustin takes a deep breath and exhales hard, clearing his throat.

"thanks for um," he tries, fidgeting with the drawstring of his hoodie. "thank you for. uh."

"use your words dee," steve says gently, flashing dustin what he hopes is a reassuring smile.

"thanks for not ditching me." his cheeks get darker and his voice trembles, and steve worriedly wonders if he's going to start crying. "you're like. the big brother I never got to have."

"dee - you know what," steve says softly, sparing a glance at the boy in the passenger seat, fond warmth swirling in his chest. "you're like my really cool little bro."

"you think?" he asks, and he laughs somewhat wetly. he swipes a hand over his face as discreetly as he can and steve decides not to call him out on it. "like, for real?"

"for real." he reaches out carefully and squeezes dustin's shoulder, holding his hand there for a few moments before returning it to the wheel. he smiles. "I didn't even know middle schoolers could be cool

until I met you."

dustin smiles wide at that, finally turning to face the front and wiping at his cheeks again, apparently satisfied with the answer he got. "I like having a big brother," dustin murmurs gently, honestly, and it's enough to bring tears to steve's eyes. they do not fall, but they shine in his eyes, hot and kind of prickly, and he finds that he doesn't mind being called dustin's older brother whatsoever, in fact he welcomes it. he grins so hard that his cheeks hurt.

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vii. the party.

steve doesn't really know how he ended up adopting six children in the beginning of his senior year. he didn't plan on it, it just kind of happened, but it's one of the better things this whole ordeal has produced. it was never about nancy. he *likes* hanging with these dorks.

he doesn't expect that to change anytime soon.